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Classroom Environment between Stimulation and Discouragement. Teacher's Contribution to Creating a New Socio-affective Environment Favoring the Teacher-Student Communication

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Abstract

School environment is where communication takes place, improves and is cultivated. In this predominantly communicative environment, teachers must prove they possess communication skills and, at the same time, they are able to train and develop information skills and communication skills in students as prerequisites of an efficient learning, a rich social life and high quality relationships. The study shows that students' communication skills strongly develop under the influence of adults, and mainly teachers, who have the role of providing opportunities for constructive communication. The communication situations created in this way must benefit from a favorable socio-affective climate in order to become effective, and this climate rests largely on the skills and abilities of teachers.

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1. Introduction

From the oldest times, society exists and evolves only by transmission of information, by communication. The permanent exchange of messages contributes to the relative homogeneity of groups, as people start sharing common goals, convictions, aspirations, knowledge, they start developing intellectual and emotional similarities and similar ways to respond to expectations and requests. Communication thus represents an absolutely necessary element for the optimal functioning of any human collectivity.

Our contemporary high-tech society facilitates less and less interpersonal, face-to-face communication between individuals. Children communicate through social networks even if they live in the same neighborhood, they don't go out in open air, instead sitting all day in front of laptops, tablets and latest generation smartphones. Their language is coded and conversation transforms in a string of symbols which, for the majority of parents, make no sense. It is alarming for us as teachers to realize that these technical means have become indispensable to them as no single outdoor trip is taken without the ever-present tablet in the backpack. Where is authentic communication between children, we wonder?

Therefore the difficult task of ensuring students regain and start using their communication skills belongs to school and teachers.

Communication is people's ability to transform random sounds into words, by which they are capable to make their wishes, ideas and feelings known. Communicating is important because we are not alone. We are social beings, we live together and we need one another. Communication has a major influence on shaping human personality because the individual defines oneself in relation to others and the self is built through interaction with peers. Lack of communication, on the other hand, triggers an imminent distancing from the group, from society, it leads to loneliness. Student-teacher communication is a largely encountered topic in literature, being of major concern due to the complexity of social life.

Primary education is characterized by the most profound and productive psychical traits of individuality, by receptivity, sensitivity and flexibility. Hence, the need to work upon the creative potential of young pupils and to capitalize it, to shape and develop their cognitive, affective and social egos.

Children must possess the ability to communicate with those around them, to express their impressions, thoughts, ideas and feelings intelligibly, which will become a basis for their future social life.

Classroom environment between stimulation and discouragement – classroom management

Classrooms are communities, groups of individuals developing functional relationships and a series of elements shared between all members (norms, values, goals, ideals, etc.). The social integration function of classrooms is a response to the needs of belonging, acknowledgement, affirmation and status. Each student needs to feel accepted and a part of the group they belong to; being marginalized and excluded is a source of behavior disorders (aggressiveness, violence, truancy, anxiety, school phobia, etc.). Within classroom there is a tendency to cultivate and maintain the uniqueness and cohesion of the group, any behavior and actions non-compliant with classroom rules being sanctioned. Classroom is where students acquire an image of themselves in all likelihood. By constant comparing with and differentiating from others, students adjust their behavior and establish their place or status. As long as the classroom they belong to is a safe environment, offering a certain degree of psychological comfort, students can develop optimally and their personality is modeled.

Classroom environment is suitable for the development of imagination, creativity and cognition through situations created by the teacher. In primary education children's imagination is highly developed and its cultivation and stimulation depend largely on the teacher.

From the perspective of group theory, classroom may be considered an educational community if it fulfills certain characteristics (Ciprian Ceobanu in Cucos, 2009, p. 555):

- a) unity of time and place, which involves closeness and minimal inter-personal distance between group members (students);
- b) reason to be together and co-exist; even if individual objectives of students are different, education is the shared classroom objective;
- c) relatively shared experience, as students in a class participate in and experiment with a series of curricular and extra-curricular activities, as well as their consequences (be it negative or positive);

- d) the possibility for each member to be perceived and represented by all the others. Each student observes his/her colleagues, forms an opinion about them, about oneself and about the classroom as a whole (by comparison);
- e) establishment of a distinct entity, classroom being perceived as a unit, with specific traits that sets it apart from other classrooms;
- f) the possibility to initiate interactions, students being able to communicate between them and influence each other;
- g) a sufficient amount of time for group normativity to emerge. This process refers to establishing models or structures at classroom level, expressed in group functions and norms that facilitate student's integration and identification with the group they belong to.

Normativity refers to a body of rules that regulates an ongoing educational activity. Its constitutive elements are: norms, rules and procedures (routines). Norms represent the values of the class-group and are developed by the entire group and not imposed from outside. In this case, the role of the teacher is to facilitate the establishment of positive norms. This can be accomplished by encouragements and strengthening positive behavior. Rules are absolute, they cannot be negotiated, especially those referring to security, safety, personal or collective hygiene and, above all, they must be strictly obeyed. They have to be known by all students and by teacher (traffic safety rules, collective hygiene rules, rules regarding fire safety and earthquakes, etc.). Procedure (routines) focus on the way certain activities must be carried out within class or school. They refer to a simple behavior that can be clearly described and followed and they can change according to needs or to the situation encountered.

For the elements of school normativity to operate optimally, a series of conditions must be met: to be clear, so that observing them leads to the expected behaviors; to be reasonable and not involve important resources for being put in practice; to be achievable by all students they address to.

School climate management

The effectiveness of teaching is in close connection to the "school climate", represented by the development of a suitable teacher - student and student - student relationship. Imitating models is an extremely influential learning strategy and the role models are very important for children, especially at a young age. Teachers may serve as a model, either a positive one, or, unfortunately, a negative one. For a teacher to become a model for his/her students, he/she has to be liked and respected by them. Authority must be gained by the teacher through forging quality relationships with students and not be due to scientific or professional status. This type of model will influence children irrespective of their age.

The teacher-student relationship is a mutual, dynamic construction, permanently adjusting according to circumstances and educational purposes. The ratio between the two parties is unbalanced, asymmetric due to age gap, life experience, social status and cultural endowment.

Starting from the part teachers play in managing and conducting educational processes and based on the degree of their involvement, we can differentiate three types of teacher-student relationships: democratic relationships; laissez – faire relationships; authoritarian relationships. The best type of teacher-student relationship is the democratic one, the teachers' mission being to build strong characters, independent and autonomous individuals and not puppets. Optimal teacher-student relationships are built in time and need the involvement of all those concerned: teachers, students, family. There are a series of strategies to build and maintain positive and trusting relationships of mutual cooperation between beneficiaries: getting to know students outside school environment and in their family circle; avoiding criticism, irony, ridiculing students, as it damages their self-confidence and fosters a negative self-image; maintaining a balanced ration between punishments and rewards, avoiding punishment as much as possible as it blocks communication routes and fosters a tense affective atmosphere; delegating control and responsibilities across classroom; management of educational crisis situations.

An effective classroom management mainly entails prevention, respectively the adoption of all measures meant to avoid crisis situations in education. Educational crisis situations refer to disciplinary problems which, unfortunately, have taken an ascending trend in our schools in recent years, affecting both secondary and upper-secondary education and primary education. The violent behavior in some families and the unrestricted access to cartoons and videogames promoting violence are some of the causes why children develop violent behaviors, both physically and verbally.

Teachers have the difficult task of changing these unwanted behaviors in children subjected to negative influences, in order to maintain a safe environment for all children.

School is the place where children learn, establish relationships, values and role models are promoted, and where conditions for the cognitive, affective and moral development of children are created. Classroom is a group whose members depend on one another, influencing each other to determine the functional balance of the educational field.

The act of teaching-learning-evaluation is a relational process in itself. W. Weber defines classroom management as a „set of activities by which teachers promote the appropriate behavior of the student and eliminate the inappropriate behavior, develop good personal relations and a positive socio-emotional climate in class, establishes and maintains an efficient and productive organization of the classroom” (Sălăvăstru, 2004, p. 267).

Children’s violent behaviors may have their origin in a defective classroom management, as the authoritarian leadership style leads to accumulation of tensions and frustrations. The authoritarian style negatively influences communication with the teacher. Also, communication between students is reduced; their opinions regarding classroom life are not taken into consideration.

The need for communication is a fundamental need for any individual, and the school group is a privileged place to satisfy this need. If this need is left unsatisfied, it inevitably triggers frustration, manifested as aggressive behavior. The improper attitude of the teacher towards students (ignorance, indifference, contempt, bantering) determines the development of a negative self-esteem which, once internalized, can lead to a host of behavioral consequences: lack of communication; inwardness; apathy/ passivity during lessons or any type of activity; indifference; disruption of classes; development of hostile, challenging attitude.

Sometimes, unconsciously, teachers differentiate between students, according to their performance. Parkay and Stanford (Dorina Sălăvăstru, 2004, p. 268) highlight some of these attitudes: they allow less time for students with modest achievements (they give them less time to think for an answer; they pay them less attention and interact with them more rarely; they do not adjust their didactic methods to help them); they have less patience with these students (direct them in their answers, or offer the answer themselves to spare time; they do not give them feedback; they rarely call on underachievers for any type of activity; they do not involve them in competitive activities between different classes in school in order not to lose); they ignore underachievers (they place them in the last row of desks; they do not accept or use their ideas in class; they do not interact with them as they do with the rest of the children); they pay little interest to them (they are not acting friendly towards them; they rarely smile at them if at all; they grant fewer non-verbal cues showing support, attention and understanding); they discriminate underachievers or modest achievers (they do not give them prizes for their successes; they criticize them for every mistake; they rarely elicit anything from them; they score them differently).

This attitude of teachers can in turn lead to: students removing themselves from activities; indifference to what happens in classroom; truancy; refusal to do homework; verbal abuse against colleagues; aggressive behavior. G. Weil (Sălăvăstru, 2004, p. 269) speaks of the syndrome of school failure as an important risk factor for the increase in school violence. To G. Weil, the feeling of failure when internalized leads to deep and lasting psychological scars which often find expression in violent behavior. Student in a situation of school failure who repeatedly face challenging learning tasks they cannot cope with live a profound anguish. They suffer because they cannot be at the same level as their colleagues and because they have disappointed their parents. To disguise this suffering and the lack of confidence in their own strength, they change their behavior and become violent to somehow take revenge.

Another factor negatively influencing students’ behavior and at the same time the school socio-affective climate in the way teachers use the reward – punishment system. Any teacher should know that punishments have as long term effects: anxiety, frustration and the deterioration of teacher – student relationship. For punishment to be effective, it has to have meaning, to be integrated in a coherent system that links observing school rules and norms to the nature of the punished deed and to the type of sanction and it also has to be resorted to as rarely as possible. Both punishment and reward are effective only in terms of getting the student to temporarily agree with what teachers consider to be desirable behavior.

School is the most important system to cultivate social conformism. From this point of view, using punishments and rewards in education has as consequence cultivating a false self-image as children stop cultivating themselves and become what is expected of them.

Students need permanent feed-back, need to be encouraged, supported, motivated and prepared for a society in continuous change.

Shaping human personality, as a complex process of becoming and training, can only be achieved in close relation with education and learning and the school’s socio-affective environment.

1.1. Methodology

2.1. Objective: To identify concrete ways to ensure a socio-affective environment that is conducive to student – teacher communication in primary schools.

2.2. Research hypotheses

If between student and teacher there is authentic, efficient communication, then educational crisis situations can be avoided.

If the emotional context (moods, emotional –affective manifestations) is defective, then blocks appear in didactic communication (between student and teacher).

2.3. Instruments

Group interview (for students)

Questionnaire (for teachers)

2.4. Procedure

The research conducted on a number of 126 subjects (36 teachers and 90 students) demonstrated that in primary education the teacher, the teacher-student communication type and the relation between the two educational actors is the foundation stone for shaping children, cultivating their positive self-image and their openness towards communication and self-expression.

The opinion of teachers is very important for children; it even becomes more important than that of family. The way they address children, the warm but firm tone of voice, the words of praise and encouragement used, open communication and respect, treating them as partners in the act of learning form strong, healthy personalities, both sociable and communicative.

Children spend a large part of their lives in school and this impacts their formation as individuals. The primary school teachers have the greatest influence on children and may benefit from total participation and support from children and their families alike.

As highlighted in the responses of teachers, and confirmed by the answers of students, they have a major preoccupation with creating a favorable socio-affective environment characterized by warmth, love, safety and respect.

There are children who come from disadvantaged family backgrounds, where love and care are totally missing. They need safety and warmth more than those more fortunate students, with close-knit and responsible families. To them, school shall be the family they never had; school shall provide the warmth of home. Their teacher shall become the mother figure, a role model in life and an anchor for their future.

Results

As the research showed, the verbal and physical aggressive reactions are considered by children to be most damaging. Students' behaviors, as appropriate or inappropriate as they may be, reflect the development level of skills acquired up to a certain moment. In this respect, manifesting aggressive reactions hides a deficit of emotional and social skills (difficulties of managing emotions like shame, fear, boredom, and difficulty in managing conflicts and a lack of conflict resolution skills) and reflects the need for new learning contexts. From their point of view, extra-curricular activities stimulate student – teacher communication and strengthen relationships between them. Any conflict erupting between students but also between students and teacher is solved amiably, with the help of communication.

A socio-affective environment that is hostile, cold and unwelcoming produces blocks at the level of creativity, imagination and may even lead to school failure and dropping out. School curricula that are too stuffed, learning tasks that are too challenging and the temptations outside school (Internet, smartphones, TV shows that promote money earning with no connection to academic achievements, etc.) do not motivate children to come to school. If they also come against an unwelcoming environment, lack of communication and understanding then the risk they drop out of school is great and a society without education is easier to manipulate.

Teacher – student communication is at the basis of training future adults and its deterioration may have devastating consequences on children. A good relationship with the teacher, but also with friends and family, is all good communication is about. We express desires, intentions, feelings, and ideas with the help of

communication and, failing that, we keep to ourselves, we do not establish connections with others and we become isolated.

Besides acquiring knowledge and skills (mathematical, linguistic, informational, etc.) education must also focus on acquiring communication and active listening skills. If students have a great deal of knowledge from various fields but do not possess communication abilities, it is all in vain as they cannot use any of it. The primary role of teachers should be to train communication skills through engineering various situations for children to practice these skills.

Communication involves expressing one's needs to another. Home, within family, on the street, in school, we are caught in situations where we express our need to speak, to be understood, acknowledged, valued. Sometimes we are listened to, we are understood, respected, influenced, sometimes not. All motivates us and makes us relate. Thus, the transmission of information will be made unintentionally, unconsciously by states of tension, aggression or even through somatization in case the message we repress is negative.

Expressing emotions and feelings helps us relieve stress and fulfill our daily tasks efficiently and gaily. Communication involves expressing emotions. Learning, recognizing and appropriately managing emotions is the first step in modeling children's behavior. Once the child learns to name emotions, talk about them and use emotional language it will learn to regulate emotions as well as behavior. It is necessary for teachers to manifest more interest for the life and emotional problems of children and to be more open and confident and have a (constant) language of acceptance and support.

Discussions

Many children consider school an external event in their life and want to get rid of it as soon as possible. They find learning too challenging and meaningless, the knowledge and skills they acquire do not have any connection to reality and they believe they won't rely on what they learn in the future.

Also, if school life is riddled with negative emotions – tensions, discontent, fear, conflicts, dissatisfactions and threats, the feeling that they are not understood and listened to, that they are treated with indifference and contempt, then children are not willing to go to school; they do not go out of pleasure but out of obligation, because there is nothing they can do against it. Unfortunately this is the attitude some children have towards school. Teachers' mission, challenging enough as it is, is to make children come to school for pleasure and see school more like a choice than a chore.

Teachers' scientific training is not the only necessary skill, as maybe was the case in the past; nowadays teachers should also possess some spiritual dimensions: to treat children like individualities and not like a homogenous mass, as a "class"; to be creative, original, adaptable to the needs and interests of children; to share their opinions, feelings, and ideas to children without forcing them to assimilate them; to respect and value children; to establish a socio-affective environment that fosters learning, safety, openness and enthusiasm; to offer children an environment rich enough in varied learning experiences, that facilitate interpersonal relations, cooperation and authentic communication.

Let's transform school into a welcoming and attractive place. A friendly school is a place where energies are stimulated and enthusiasm is the usual state of being of those who live and work there. Here children feel safe, protected, important and loved. It is a place where (if they feel like it and want it) they may retire and deepen their own world, where they do not feel alone, ignored and abandoned. Every student is always helped to learn, to express their individuality, to ask questions and find answers (Albu, 2013, p. 201).

The way a child thinks about himself, about others and the environment (in this case, school) influences his wellbeing, his feelings towards himself and those around him. School, by the way students interact with their teachers and other children, becomes, to them a context that models their thinking. The amount of self-confidence, the ease or on the contrary, the wariness to learn and experiment new things depend on the quality of the environment he spends his time in. And school is precisely that, a meaningful context for students. Their teachers, just like their parent, is a role model to them, from the way they solve a problem to the way they act and react when angry (even if they try to hide it), the way they express joy or share their fear or anxiety.

When relationships are authentic and are based on mutual preoccupation for others' needs, they become an essential source of evolution. Relationships model and remodel our thinking, our acting and reacting to situations. School offer children the framework to practice building and maintaining relationships as it is the place where they learn the care for their needs and the needs of others.

To create this environment as rich in experiences and interpersonal relationships, open and welcoming, it is necessary that teachers treat students with special attention, to enter their universe, know their passions, hobbies, to relate with children outside school, in extra-curricular activities, to know their families, homes and entourage.

A professional educator is always careful to know students in more situations and contexts in order to know how to treat them and how to approach them because they manifest differently based on these contexts. Thus, they will develop a genuine personality, not a false one; they will not act only as they think is expected of them; instead they will frequently behave personally and assumed.

Teachers should be the ones to support and encourage children, to determine them to communicate and initiate communication themselves, to express opinions and argue their point of view, to stimulate thinking, creativity and develop a positive self-esteem. Teachers should become a collaborator of their students, a partner to help find their own way. They should encourage originality, novelty, imagination and not embrace conformism and obedience. They should be masters of dialogue and questions, actors who know how to play their role to the benefit of children, attracting them towards learning. Effective, authentic education is based on love, respect, trust, cooperation and acceptance and not on constriction and submission.

As we have shown before, school is the place where the child spends a large part of his life. In recent years, schools were equipped with new furniture, last generation technology equipment and didactic resources as varied as possible. But are these features enough to motivate children to come to school? I think not! Children come to school for the sake of their teachers, from the desire to see them and listen to them. As the saying goes “man blesses the place” and this also applies to teachers. Even if a school is not as equipped, but it has teachers with noble souls, it will compensate for material deprivations. Otherwise, the result is contrary to expectations; we will have apathetic children, unmotivated, with no interest for activities. Thus, failure is twofold: teachers have not fulfilled their mission (shaping harmonious personalities), and students will not find their way in life and will meander on wrong paths.

A school environment where children feel respected, loved, safe should be the concern of every teacher. Let's struggle and always preoccupy with the resources we use, with the best methods, with suggesting topics to raise interest.

Being teacher is not a mere four-hour job, it is about vocation, a way of life, and it means to devote ourselves fully and unrestrainedly to the children whom we care about. Their accomplishments shall be ours, their failures shall trouble us as they trouble them, but, over the years, when they will be adults, reliable individuals, we shall have the satisfaction that we contributed to their personality structure.

How can we make children come happily to school? By teaching them to have confidence in themselves, and in us, the teachers; being open to their problems, being careful with their emotional needs and preoccupied with the quality of relationships we forge as their teachers. Why care towards their needs? Because they are the main source of adaptation and they indicate what is required. Paying attention to emotions we pay attention to our fundamental needs. Ignoring them, we become estranges from what we need in that particular moment. When our needs are fulfilled then we are able to evolve, and our purpose – teachers' purpose – is for children to evolve.

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